

# Book Reviews

**Melancholia of Freedom: Social Life in an Indian Township in South Africa.** *Thomas Blom Hansen.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 384 pp.

**OLAF ZENKER**

University of Bern

*Melancholia of Freedom* offers a rich and nuanced analysis of social life in postliberation South Africa, as unfolding in the formerly Indian township of Chatsworth, near Durban. Thomas Blom Hansen skilfully traces a pervasive sense of loss and displacement in the multifaceted everyday lives of South African Indians. Interrogating the uncertainties, dreams, and anxieties of ordinary Indians, historically situated ambiguously between privileged whites and oppressed Africans, this book will no doubt become a key reference for works on South Africa engaging the multiple ambivalences after apartheid.

In the “introduction,” Hansen brings ideas by Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Fanon, Hegel, Arendt, and Freud into fruitful dialogue, suggesting the notions of “gaze” and “misrecognition” as orientations for subsequent chapters. The “gaze” can be seen as constitutive for human consciousness yet split between a generalized vision of social conventions and a phantasmic gaze of pure presence. Their entanglements lead to perpetual “misrecognition,” in which subjectivities formed in anticipation of a regulating gaze “fail to fully embrace what they are supposed to be or become, because this second unfathomable gaze can never be fully understood” (p. 4). Under apartheid, South African life was powerfully structured by a racialized gaze. As such, unfreedom provided the certainties of a generalized gaze one could not escape, while simultaneously allowing community life to flourish in the racial enclave. Because of its problematic racialized nature, this recent past—or, rather, Indians’ emotional attachments to it and their sense of its loss after liberation—cannot be publicly bemoaned except as narratives of antiapartheid struggles. As such, narratives have little traction in Chatsworth; this past becomes unspeakable and its memory, Hansen argues, melancholic rather than nostalgic.

The subsequent chapters trace this *Melancholia of Freedom* within different realms of township life. Chapter 1 provides an overview of reconfigurations of “the Indians” since their first arrival in the 1860s. Increasingly restrictive discourses of containment led to waves of forced removals

and the establishment of the exclusively Indian township of Chatsworth in the late 1950s. Its management, education, and policing developed into contested issues of negotiations between policy makers and community activists, the latter ambiguously succumbing to and trying to beat the system from within.

Chapter 2 maps the transformations of the sociality and cultural intimacy within “the community” made possible by this spatial containment. New housing shifted focus from the extended to the nuclear family, creating fears of deracinated individuals lacking the values of “the Indian family.” Under the “gaze” of the Indian elite, unsophisticated working-class members recognizable by their styles of comportment (*charou*) developed into figures of concern. Much ridiculed as an embarrassment in a sophisticated joking culture that adopts an imagined external gaze, charous are also ambivalently celebrated for their cultural authenticity.

Chapter 3 deals with interracial tensions and what Hansen calls “mutual nonrecognition” between Indian and black South Africans. Violent riots in 1949 and 1985 became elements within contradictory mythicohistories with racist allegations on both sides. Hansen insists that mutual relations were constituted indirectly only through intense battles for recognition from the white master, while dealing with each other through “willed incomprehension” (hence, “nonrecognition”). With the end of apartheid, African intrusions into formerly Indian Chatsworth are primarily read locally in terms of violence and crime.

Chapter 4 focuses on political institutions, designed under apartheid to give Indians some autonomy. In contrast to mass mobilization by the Natal Indian Congress during the 1940s, this new state-induced self-management since the 1960s did not lead to strong local engagement or identification—too evidently did these institutions embody a form of “as-if-politics.” Leaving active party work to well-known local activists, some of whom are both ridiculed and admired for their unapologetic charou style, politics has been increasingly conceived as an object of ridicule and form of enjoyment.

Chapter 5 turns to an unexpected convergence between Indian and African youth cultures regarding the mobile soundscapes of South African minibus taxis. Many local Indians use such taxis for commuting to work or for recreational trips. In recent years, decorative styles, sonic tastes pumping out of massive sound systems, and divergent registers of embodied coolness by drivers and conductors

have led to both differentiation and convergence across racial divides. According to Hansen, this new hybrid youth culture, often interpreted as “charou” by middle-class Indians, actually leads to “Indianness, African-style.”

The remaining three chapters deal with purification rather than hybridization of Indianness. Chapter 6 speaks about the transnational fetishization of India, as exemplified in growing roots tourism (both alienating and idealized) of South African Indians to South Asia and in a recent local hype for Bollywood movies projecting “India” as exotic yet modern, authentic yet global. Chapter 7 sketches the zeal for purification in the field of religion. Both Hindu and Moslem middle-class Indians strive hard for exorcising popular rituals, customs, and superstitions from their respective pure and universal religion. At the same time, more vernacular brands of Hinduism and Islam remain popular, performed apologetically by some and defiantly by others. Chapter 8 follows the growing number of local Indians, seeking their salvation through a conversion from well-established “Indian” religions to Pentecostal Christianity. Hansen interprets this partly as a desire for respectability and purity that is compatible with a predominantly Christian national culture. In a brief “postscript,” Hansen returns to the theme of melancholia among marginalized Indians in Chatsworth who bemoan the loss, not of unfreedom but, rather, of relative cultural autonomy, especially under the current “ideologically vague African populism” (p. 294) of President Zuma.

*Melancholia of Freedom* is an ambitious, provocative, and highly stimulating undertaking. It covers an impressive array of social fields, which some readers might feel could have been more strongly integrated. In a similar vein, the theoretical apparatus contextualizes, rather than persistently guides, the empirical analysis. Yet this is part of the beauty of this book, which is holistic without being hermetic and offers numerous important insights into the predicaments of postcolonial freedom, while refusing to adopt any authoritative gesture of interpretive closure. It is undoubtedly a brilliant new landmark in the literature on postapartheid South Africa.